

The Rise of International Festivals and the example (Case Study) of Sziget

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Abstract (*The Rise of International Festivals and the Example (Case Study) of Sziget*)

The touristic importance of music festivals is increasing throughout Europe. More than a thousand festivals of international interest exist on the continent, and their creative concepts are also increasingly important. Only events with a program including unique elements of international interest can stand out from the crowd. In addition to the creative concept, determinant factors include accommodation options, accessibility, price level, and country/city image. The organizational background of these events is also important: programming, marketing, sponsorships, technological/technical and financial divisions all play an important role in the international character of a festival. What is more, internationalism also needs to appear in the corporate structure.

The authors address this topic not only through an analysis of international literature, but also through a case study based on an in-depth interview research performed with the management of the Sziget Festival. The aim of the study is to show music festival organisers and future festival organizers how to build and operate an international festival and enrich the relevant literature, creating a solid theoretical base.

Keywords music festival; international communication; festival tourism; Sziget Festival

Rezumat (*Creșterea popularității festivalurilor internaționale. Studiu de caz: Festivalul Sziget*)

Importanța turistică a festivalurilor muzicale este în creștere în toată Europa. Însă pot avea succes numai acele festivaluri a căror program include elemente unice de interes internațional. Pe lângă conceptul creativ, factorii determinanți includ opțiunile de cazare, acces, nivelul prețurilor și imaginea țării/orașului. Pe baza unei fundamentări teoretice solide, scopul studiului este de a îndruma organizatorii de festivaluri privind modul în care pot crea un festival internațional. Studiul de caz privește Festivalul Sziget, care este una dintre cele mai mari evenimente muzicale și culturale din Europa, organizat în luna august a fiecărui an.

Cuvinte cheie festival de muzică, comunicare internațională, turism festivalier, Festivalul Sziget

1. What Do We Call a Festival?

We do not find a general definition for festival-like events as their **definition differs** by country, cultural backgrounds and circles (Dér 2017). In the Anglo-sphere, festivals are usually understood as events reflecting cultural values. In countries with German cultural connections, the term festival is used for events with a focus on gastronomy, while in areas with Italian cultural bonds fiestas and carnivals expressing the colourfulness and vivacity of the place are called festivals (Kundi 2012).

Considering countries outside Europe, regularly organized events that are public celebrations organized by the community or with the support of the community are also called festivals in Australia. At the same time, festivals in New Zealand are cultural events presenting multiple genres organizing programs with a uniform spirit, taking place within a definite time and space. (Hunyadi et al., 2006).

The **relevant literature** is also divided regarding this topic. According to a definition by Goldblatt (2002), festivals are a kaleidoscope of planned culture, sport, political and business occasions from mega-events to community festivals, from local program series to protocol attractions, from small meetings to huge competitions. Allen et al. (2008) define festivals as an important appearance of human activities that largely contribute to our social and cultural life, and are closely related to tourism, generating business activities (and therefore incomes) for host communities. Furthermore, he makes a distinction between art festivals – including music festivals gastronomy and wine festivals and regional festivals.

However, the festival categories used by the Hungarian Festival Association are somewhat different from those mentioned in the international literature. One of the reasons may be that the need to create a commonly accepted festival definition and define what events are classified as festivals, systematize and certify them emerged only a few years ago. The festivals organized in Hungary can be **classified by their genre**:

- art festivals (music, theatre, dance, literature, fine and applied arts, film, video, photo, multimedia, folk art/folklore, circus, other art)
- fully amateur art and on-stage contests (reciting, chorus, theatre etc.)
- gastronomy festivals (food, drink, , crops, culinary)
- other non-artistic festivals (e.g. castle games, fairs, carnivals, fiestas, etc.)). (Sulyok, Sziva 2009.)

According to the current viewpoint of the Hungarian Festival Registration Program, **any event that classifies as a festival**

- has a coherent and unique concept
- is a unique and exceptional event
- is concentrated and has at least 2-3 programs a day
- is organized in multiple locations if possible
- it targets a wider audience
- its visitor number is considerable, at least a few hundred people
- it lasts for at least two (successive) days

- its budget is at least HUF 2-3 million (Inkei, 2010).

According to the practice of the relevant literature, in the study we use the term 'festival' for events that usually last for more than one day bringing benefit to participants in a cultural and/or social sense, and to hosting settlements in a cultural, social and economic sense.

2. Categorizing Music Festivals

The European Festivals Association (EFA) uses the terms small, medium and big music festivals for the categorization of music festivals (EFA 2018). The number of visitors is basis of the society's decision regarding which category a festival belongs to. It adds up the number of daily visitors and the number of sold tickets (for instance, a weekly pass at the Sziget Festival counts as seven). Based on their categorization, a **small festival** would have 10-15 thousand visitors, a **medium festival** would have from 20 to 50 thousand visitors, and a **big festival** would have more than 50 thousands visitors a day. Small festivals include the EFOTT and Strand Festivals in the Hungarian market; the Hideout festival in Croatia (which has more English visitors than Croatian, proving it is genuinely a touristic product!), and typically festivals that are built on one genre of music, such as « Jazz in the Park » in Romania. Balaton Sound and VOLT count as medium – even though they seem big in Hungary, they still belong to the medium category on an international scale. Usually, up to 90 to 100 thousand people can visit a big festival; for instance, Tomorrowland in Belgium has a 130-thousand capacity, and Sziget has a capacity of 95 thousand visitors. Apart of that, there are plenty of thematic festivals that welcome 3-4 thousand daily visitors. They usually do not count on big international interest; they represent a genre that attracts less people. For instance, an opera festival with 4-5 thousand people is already considered big. (Lobenwein – Orbán 2016, Kádár 2018)

Table 1 - A Categorization of Music Festivals

EFA category:	Daily visitors:	International example:	Hungarian example:
Small-sized	10-15 000 persons	Hideout (CR), Jazz in the Park (RO)	B my Lake (HU), EFOTT (HU), Strand (HU)
Medium-sized	20-50 000 persons	Lovefest (SRB), Electric Castle (RO), Solar Weekend (NL)	VOLT (HU), Balaton Sound (HU)

Major	Over 50 000 persons	Rock Werchter (B), Tomorrowland (B), Rock am Ring (D)	Sziget (HU)
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Source: EFA categorization and the authors' own research

3. The Trends of the Music Festival Market

On the market of international music festivals, we sense a strong increase, which is due to the **metamorphosis of the music industry**. In past times, bands would go on tour to present their new albums: they would perform for a relatively low price and play a few new songs from the album along with their big hits from the past, and the pleased public would then run to purchase the new album. Bands, managers and editors would live off the album sales. Today, the income from album sales has shrunk to a small fraction of its past number, thanks to Spotify, YouTube, iTunes or illegal downloads. This is why the trend has been reversed: tours are now the bands' main source of income. Nowadays, they only sell new albums or new songs downloadable at a low price to promote their tours. At the same time, the fees of bands have become much higher, and they keep growing incredibly fast, even in the case of lesser-known performers. There have been bands that requested a certain fee in 2016, and requested a triple rate in 2017 (Investing in Music 2016; Global Music Report 2017). This also happens because there are fewer and fewer headliners (superstars whose names attract a lot of visitors) that work as a joker in the international card deck. The entire festival industry struggles with high performing rates. Ticket prices cannot be raised at this pace, so there must be a way to compensate for it. DJ culture is more and more popular with the public, which is a blessing for festival organizations as DJ's travelling fees are merely a fraction of a band's cost who travel with a huge staff. There are more and more DJs at festivals, and there are also festivals with only DJ performers. (Investing in Music 2016; Global Music Report 2017)

The other reason of this increase is that **the public is also interested in the live experience**; the money they earlier spent on purchasing music is now spent on concerts and festivals. Over the last 10 years, visiting festivals has become some mainstream activity, it is not the subcultural thing it used to be. Much wider social groups are going to festivals, and it is now perfectly natural for the youth to spend a bit of the summer at a festival, even abroad. The audience is growing, and the demand for festivals is growing as well; therefore there is an increasing number of festivals. However, because there are so many festivals now, fewer and fewer superstars get more and more offers, thus increasing their rates.

The basic condition for the live experience is that there must be a location of sufficient size, equipped with the necessary technical background so that the bands can perform. Since there is a growing demand, the number of concert halls,

entertainment centers and open-air locations is growing all around the world, and their conditions also improve.

The **view** is closely related to the live experience, thus developing the show technology of the tours. Bands strive to optimize their expenses; they almost go “plug and play” completely: The basic infrastructure is provided by the location, and bands just bring what they need for their specific visual universe.

The number of superstars becoming famous in a specific year is smaller than that of those who retire. Only a few new ones reach the level of U2 or Coldplay for instance. The first reason for it is that music consumption of the younger age group differs from that of previous generations: they do not focus their attention on one particular performer, but on music genres. Therefore they listen to various artists within a specific genre, and constantly crave for new ones. YouTube is a great tool to achieve this, in addition to festivals.

Sharing online content can multiply the size of the audience: if someone sees that a friend posts a picture or a video in which he enjoys himself, or sees an after-movie, he will want to go to the festival too, since he wants to be part of the enjoyment too. This is why festivals use more and more media content (Kádár 2017).

The price of a daily pass is the same as the price of a concert ticket. However, in the case of a festival, one can go to 4-5 different concerts. Besides, there are many other attractions between two stages. This fact contributes to the increasing attraction of festivals; a lot of people prefer to spend their music budget on a Sziget Festival pass rather than going to a single concert. Festivals compete with each other for the public: they spend a lot on infrastructure development and a satisfying environment to make themselves more and more attractive for visitors (Dér 2017).

In 2014, The European Festivals Association prepared a survey on 35 thousand people. Based on its results, they were able to prove **the outstanding significance of festivals in entire Europe**. It turned out that people are willing to travel to participate in festivals not only domestically, but also abroad: 39 percent of people answering the survey said they had already travelled to visit a festival abroad. This information bears an important message for organizers: the international public must be called upon, and festivals must also adapt to their needs. According to the survey, the average age of people going to festivals is 26 years. This means that the entire 18-35 demographic group is concerned, and there are a lot more older people than they had previously thought. Furthermore, there are two interesting pieces of information: 91 percent of interviewees have a smartphone, half of them slept in a camping, and the other half in hostels or hotels. This shows the possible influence of a festival on the tourism industry of a specific area (Kádár 2018).

There are more than 1000 festivals in Europe, from themed boutique festivals to big festivals – **everything that can be interesting on an international scale**. There is a tendency of mergers and purchasing on the festival market. The market's biggest actor, Live Nation, is constantly acquiring festivals. Furthermore, a few festivals expand their brand, and sell it in several cities as a franchise, or they take it out of Europe, like Ultra or Tomorrowland (Festival insights 2015).

The only way to stand out of this dense crowd is **to have a unique concept**. This is a well-developed business in Hungary that is worth billions of euros: the local public already has high expectations towards the provided services, and organizers adapted the festivals to meet these requirements (Dér 2017).

4. How has Sziget Become an International Festival?

Sziget's 2009 ('Prodidzsáj') advertisement was chosen the best Hungarian advertisement of the last 20 years in a public vote organised by Kreatív marketing communications magazine in 2012. No matter how successful it was domestically, foreigners could not understand the advertisement, although it was undoubtedly humorous and catchy in Hungarian (Kreatív 2012).

The result of different messages in the various advertisements for different target groups was also reflected in ticket sales indicators. The organizers subsequently made the decision to create **a single message that would be clear for both domestic and international audiences**. Instead of the communication used before, they took a more refined and classic approach, supplemented by the message of freedom and getting away from the everyday. Sziget became a real international festival with this communication, although the appropriate content had been available for years. Sziget's ticket sales indicators started to improve in 2014/15. Prior to that, they changed several aspects of the festival's communications after the 2012 festival: they announced the festival republic, and the first aftermovie and Sziget anthem were created. They could sell even less tickets in 2013 as the 2012 festival did not yet provide a basis for the development of sales – the product was not as good as its communication. Nevertheless, their communication was considerably different that year: they organized a closing show, and pieces of art following the Art of Freedom concept appeared in Sziget. They started using a **uniform international slogan** after year 2013, and the name Fesztiválköztársaság (Festival Republic) was also replaced by Island of Freedom within Hungary. The program budget was increased in order to enable the announcement of bigger names and more popular performers for the 2014 event. Following Sziget 2014, the Sztizen Prime concept was introduced, providing first customers with a special gift package – as a result, 8 000 passes were sold only by this tool. (Kádár 2018)

5. What Makes an International Festival?

According to the management of Sziget Kft., an event becomes international when **at least 10 percent of its visitors are from outside the local market** (Kádár 2017). In most festivals, the local public is still dominant, but the 10 percent threshold of international visitors is reached on more and more festivals. This, however, comes with conditions. One of these is **accommodation**. In the culture of several countries, sleeping in a tent is not a thing, therefore the area must have

enough accommodation. In the case of Tomorrowland and Glastonbury, there is no other choice than to sleep on the spot, as these festivals are far away from cities. In these two cases, they also have to think of visitors who do not like camping, so they have built comfortable container houses, wooden houses, luxurious yurts, and bungalows (those are naturally offered at a higher price) (Tomorrowland 2018, Glastonbury 2018).

The other condition is **accessibility**. In the case of Sziget Festival, it is a tremendous advantage that the location is so close to the city center. On the other hand, in the case of festivals organized outside of agglomerations, a transportation system must be set up – e.g. Tomorrowland provides bus rides between the nearest town and the festival's location. (Tomorrowland 2018).

Different **locations** mean different attitudes: he who comes to the Sziget Festival will often visit Budapest as well, which is also part of the experience; however, visitors of festivals far away from cities do not wander around.

Pricing is of utmost importance as well. Ticket prices are just one item out of many. The price of catering, for instance, also has its importance. In the case of Hungarian festivals, this is a particularly strong attraction for foreigners, as prices are below European standards, therefore they are considered cheap.

The last influencing factor is **country image**. If the public constantly receives bad news about a country, or customs and attitude are too different, it creates a negative image, and visitors tend to go there less often (Dér 2017).

6. Elements of Festival Concepts

If we have the aforementioned attributes, the next step is an **event concept** that must be well developed and extended to every detail. The strategy must contain both content and elements of marketing. First, we need to **position** the festival: we must define the target group, price the event and add **brand attributes** to it including vision, attitude and message. Just as Nike does not only say “we sell good shoes”, it is not enough for a festival to say “There are concerts; if you like the performers, come over.” We need communication, we need a story that provides the true festival experience (Kádár 2017).

Today, **a festival also functions as a brand**. It is a marketing product just like anything else we pick up from the shelves at stores. This is why a conscious concept is important; the packaging, the program and the facade must fundamentally support and contribute to each other.

To provide an international taste, you must have an **internationally acknowledged program**. Kádár Tamás, the managing director of Sziget Kft. says that Dutch visitors will not come to a Hungarian folk dance festival unless we also invite Dutch groups. This means that a popular music festival can only be attractive to the international public with international stars. Every genre has its international stars, from opera to DJs; they are the ones that must be found and paid for. The program in itself can be themed and varied though, but a local performer will only attract local audience. There are countries in which local bands

are both local and international, they are in a little luckier situation as they can fill the performers' list with bigger names. That is why England is a popular festival country. If we target a foreign market, it is worth bringing local stars from there too. If, for instance, a Hungarian festival visitor sees that Quimby (a well-known Hungarian band) performs at a festival in Germany, he will feel involved, and will be more willing to travel there. It is also worth bringing smaller stars to an international festival, because they are not that expensive; furthermore, they will want to come because performing at a festival abroad it is good marketing for them. (Kádár 2017).

There are things to consider when setting up a **program budget**. For Sziget Festival, the program budget is 44 percent of the total expense. The budget of the main stage is 60 percent of the program budget. This means 28 performers. The entire budget of the theater of circus tent for a week is the same as a single performer/band at the main stage at an international festival. (Dér 2017). Apart from that, the festival has further 50 locations, 500-600 programs and decorations that must be set up from the remaining 40 percent of the budget.

As for the **facade**, the basis of the marketing concept is the logo. There are festivals that often change their logos. The Sziget has often changed its logo too, but the police font used for the word "Sziget" has remained the same since the beginning, 1993. We can change key elements if the festival concept too. The Woodstock festival was the first to become a brand as they created a simple message ("Three Days of Peace and Music") everyone could identify with. It is why it became "Every festival's mother" (Woodstock 2018). The facade and the message are just as important as performers. In Fall, when Sziget starts the sales, they can sell up to 25-30 percent of weekly passes without pass owners even knowing who the performers will be next August. For these customers the Sziget brand name in itself is enough to make the decision. The remaining 70-75 percent come partly with daily tickets, which are mostly sold because of the performers (Dér 2017).

7. The international activities of Sziget Kft.

Four departments work on the Sziget Festival, all of them in the spirit of satisfying the international challenge (Kádár 2018).

The **content/program department** is responsible for programs and bookings: they organize the bands' travels, their accommodation – in other words, the entire logistics. They have to set up the program strategy. In order to achieve that, they have to know which artists are the most attractive from an international point of view. Besides, they have to know the local tastes; who are the local stars, and who are the performers considered as young and rising talents that might be worth including in the program. To achieve that, they organize talent shows in several countries, whose winners can perform on the Europe stage, for instance. They are a complete, 360 degrees' artistic festival, therefore different artistic genres perform from theater to dance and fine arts. The selection of these is also the task of this department (Dér 2017).

The technical department is responsible for the infrastructure from stages to toilets. Their most important task is to assure a satisfying level of entertainment. They have to consider the cultural behaviors of various countries and cultural differences because this may affect how the showers will be set up, for instance. They have to know the needs of the international audience, and consider their observations. Since they cannot always think of all relevant issues, this is an endless learning curve (Dér 2017).

The marketing or sponsoring department takes care of the sponsors on one hand. On the other hand, they are responsible for the message, the façade and its accessibility. As for the sponsors, the department must be careful not to be too greedy and have too many of them, also not to include inappropriate ones. The marketing department must know how to manage international sales, that is, how to sell tickets abroad. They have two options to achieve that: they can either set up a centralized system (in this case the brand must be strong and attractive in every country), or work together with local partners in each country, using local marketing support to promote sales. (However, they do not allow them to realize a different promoter's own brand conceptions). In Sziget's case, partners from several countries have been approaching them year after year. Currently they have representatives in 30 countries, and their task is to vehiculate the message to the target group, also offering travelling options (when selling the ticket, they also make these options available for visitors), using local channels for ticket selling and implementing customer service solutions. Using this, they have access to the customers, and everything is communicated in local languages. They have different social media platforms in various languages, every content created in Hungary (billboards, aftermovies, information booklets) is then translated to specific local languages. However, the trend is that the ratio of centralized systems is increasing (as in the case of Tomorrowland – they do not have any partners abroad, and customers must register online). More than half of their visitors are from abroad, and come from more than 100 countries. This enforces Sziget's message ("Island of Freedom", variety, openness) as there is no other festival in the world with such a high ratio of international customers (Várhelyi 2016, Dér 2017).

The financial department does not only deal with administration: they manage the entire ticketing system, the entry system, the webshop and the cash-free payment system as well. Payment by cash-free contactless MasterCard was first introduced in Sziget Festival in 2011. Seven years later, in 2018, festival visitors could also pay by armbands that were accessible from mobile phones, managed by the festival's own application. During the first 5 days of the festival, the amount transferred via the application exceeded 3 million Euros (OPH 2018). Similarly to the marketing department, this task requires the provision of multi-lingual services: they must be able to accept different types of currencies and keep contact with banking groups as well (Dér 2017).

8. Summary

Through the example of the evolution of the music industry and its effect on the development of festivals, we once again witness the massive changes that take place thanks to – or because of – the Internet.

Once more, this phenomenal tool is radically changing our way of living, not only in our personal ways of communications, but mostly in several industries including many systems, organizations, societies and companies. In other words, those who can adapt to this relatively new wave (in some areas it has been around for a decade or more now) and surf on it can profit from its advantages. On the other hand, those who are not able to adapt to the market's new functionality for some reason are simply left out.

In the world of the communications of International Festivals, this provides an opportunity to grow, and Sziget's branding mechanisms are wonderful examples. The way the company structure was able to adapt in order to face new challenges is outstanding and worthy to be taught in marketing schools.

Their success is demonstrated by the fact that the number of visitors exceeded 500 000 in 2018, and Saturday was not the only day with full house – all other days were equally successful.

Although most of its visitors pronounce it „Ziget”, the communication of the festival was massively successful as it reached the minds of the targeted European (and non-European) youth demanding exactly this kind of product.

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*Hírközösségek és
véleménybuborékok*

[19]

Kádár Magor:

*A klasszikus média megfog,
az online média megtart*

[31]

Balogh Csaba–Dragon Zoltán:

*Egészség- és médiaipari
innovációk kapcsolata*

[39]

**Dezső Dér–Árpád Papp-Váry
–Alexandre Árpád Szigethy**

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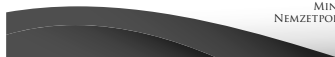
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